

# Welcome's 'Life and Times' full of lessons about civil rights

By Garland L. Thompson

**T**he passing of someone like Verda Welcome would have left a huge gap in any community. She was a historic figure in Maryland's civil rights struggles, and an autobiography should be full of lessons about how it was when the fight was down and dirty — and this one is. **SC**

But there is more to writing a book than collecting and organizing the stories told by important people.

Mrs. Welcome, a black North Carolinian who went to Delaware to finish high school and came to Baltimore to go to college, lived through epic change. She was 7 years old when World War I began in 1914, and 12 when it was over. The Roaring '20s evoke ribald memories in the cities of the North, but in 1926 young Verda Freeman was starting a career as a professional educator with a mere 10 years of school.

Her journey from North Carolina's Greenhill Elementary School to the Maryland General Assembly, where she became a pivotal figure in the fight to break segregation, provides as good a shorthand version as is likely to be found of the journey of America's blacks out of the ignorance and isolation of 70 years of racial domination.

She was first elected to the Maryland House of Delegates in 1958, and in 1962 was elected to the state senate — the first black woman to serve in a state senate in the United States. She served there for 20 memorable years, until she was defeated for re-election in 1982. **SC**

High expectations attend such a work. In an era of unrelenting legal and political attack on the mechanisms that broke discrimination, this book — co-written by James M. Abraham, a former reporter for the *News American* and the *Afro-American* — contains important lessons about the struggles that put them in place. For many too young to have seen it all happen and for others who have forgotten what life was like in the good old days Pat Buchanan so fondly remembers, her pithy observations add needed perspective. **MAR. 15 1992**

But the lessons could have been better presented. Mrs. Welcome died in 1990, so we cannot ask her for clarifications. And there are things here that need sharper focus, such as the fuzzy description of the Citizens Democratic Club, which met in an old hotel bar. Founded in 1939, its members "had little real power. Basically, they collected what black votes there were for white candidates. At the behest of white bosses, they sometimes sponsored excursions on election day to get black voters out of the city!" **SUN**

Let's have the goods: Who were the hosts of these trips, and whom were they working for? Some of that club's alumni are still active. Exactly who were the guffy parties and who, of those named just before that crushing indictment, were bystand-



SUN FILE PHOTO

Verda Welcome's autobiography gets down and dirty about fight for civil rights.

## MY LIFE AND TIMES.

Verda F. Welcome, as told to James M. Abraham.

Henry House Publishers, Englewood, N.J. 308 pages. \$19.95.

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Ambivalence toward some others, such as Victorine Adams, Juanita Mitchell and the Murphy family, also mar this story. Victorine Adams, founder of the Colored Women's Democratic Club that Mrs. Welcome praises for forcing the issue of political reform in the black community, was the wife of William L. Adams, one of the Citizens' regulars. Where was he? **SUN**

Mrs. Mitchell is cited as having held black politicians' feet to the fire in the fight for equal rights, but also as taking some hard shots at Mrs. Welcome when Mrs. Mitchell's son, Clarence, opposed Mrs. Welcome's 4th District Democratic Organization. Parren Mitchell appears in this book as a disturber of the plan for the redrawn 7th Congressional District, but later is praised as a fighter. Final verdicts here, and a clearing-up of the inclusive statement of how the early black politicians, despite the sharp fights that reduced their unity, were all as honest as Caesar's wife, would have been helpful here.

And so it goes. The subject is well worth the time spent reading this book. Her contributions were major, and her life story is inspiring. There were punches pulled, and the inclusion of a few maps would have given a better handle to readers who didn't grow up as the 4th District changed. But its depiction of the evolution of black politics offers landmarks to anyone struggling to understand today's circumstances. It's a worthwhile addition to the local lore.

Mr. Thompson writes editorials for *The Sun*.